

Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk and Mystic Aquarium

Testimony Before the Appropriations Committee of the Connecticut State Legislature

H.B. No.7027: AN ACT CONCERNING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE THIRTIETH 2019, AND MAKING APPROPRIATIONS THEREFOR

February 17, 2017

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony on behalf of The Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk and Mystic Aquarium. First, on behalf of both institutions, we express our appreciation to the Committee, to the General Assembly and to the Governor for the financial support that we each have received in the past; it has been vital to our organizations and to the communities which we serve.

Together, we are here tonight to request that specified funding for each of our institutions remain as line items in the budget. We also urge more robust funding for the state tourism budget at a level of at least \$15 million for the specific purpose of increasing tourism from the critical New York media market.

Our rationale can be summarized as follows:

- Aquariums are well established as key economic drivers in Connecticut and nationally
- The two aquariums are essential public assets that return significant investment to the local and state economy
- Tourism is a \$14 billion industry in Connecticut employing over 120,000 people in the state
- Over the past five years Connecticut has realized significant growth in hotel occupancy taxes, generating \$500 million from this tax alone
- Growth in attendance at the two aquariums correlates to increased hotel occupancy and related tax revenue
- Spending on state marketing, including dedicated funding for the two aquariums correlates to growth in visits to the state, hotel occupancy, and economic growth at the local level
- The state marketing effort including substantial advertising in the New York media market has resulted in demonstrable growth in visitors from New York and New Jersey to Connecticut

- The New York media market is prohibitively expensive for any one attraction and therefore investment in this market by the State is a solid public investment that cannot be replicated by the private or non-profit sector

Jointly, these institutions play a unique role in the state and serve as engines of the Connecticut tourism economy. In addition, they are the primary providers of essential science education to almost every school district in the state, and serve as the state's primary sentinels in protecting our most precious natural and economic resource, Long Island Sound, and the animals that are essential to its vitality.

Connecticut's two aquariums attract over 1,250,000 people on average every year by engaging them in consideration of life forms of Long Island Sound and ocean environments beyond that cannot otherwise be observed by most people. These visits bolster local, regional and state economic activity. In fact, the two institutions contribute \$114 million directly to the Connecticut economy.

The Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk and Mystic Aquarium are the primary economic engines for Connecticut's tourism industry. Over 60% of Mystic Aquarium's visitors and almost 40% of The Maritime Aquarium's visitors are from out-state, which means that these visitors eat at restaurants, shop in local stores, buy gasoline in Connecticut and stay overnight, all major contributions to Connecticut state revenue. In addition to the \$114 million in economic impact they generate, more than 1,730 jobs are directly dependent upon both institutions.

The Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk and Mystic Aquarium, working cooperatively, focus particularly on education programs related to Long Island Sound and other ocean environments that bring inquiry-based science learning to over 300,000 young students each year, with particular attention paid to inner-city districts, where the riches of an institution like our Aquariums are often not part of family life, and where excellent science instruction is needed more than ever in a state with the largest achievement gap in the nation. Our institutions also provide full day pre-school programs that provide children as young as 14 months with learning experiences to best prepare them for a successful kindergarten transition. Exposing children to science, technology, engineering/ exploration, arts and mathematics in their formative years are essential for their future career and academic success.

Our education programs go directly into K-12 schools with hands-on learning activities correlated to the state's curriculum frameworks, live animals that inspire kids, after-school programs throughout the state, and numerous on-site programs at each institution that link students with scientists. We frequently bring kids out on Connecticut's rivers, shores and waterways and to study in the State's most remarkable classroom, Long Island Sound.

In fact, evaluations of educational programs at both institutions show that our marine oriented science programs are helping Connecticut school children show significant academic gains, encouraging career exploration in the sciences, and contributing to long-term impact on science literacy and concern for the environment. Both Aquariums have received national recognition and awards for exceptional educational programming.

Both institutions play a critical role in the protection of Long Island Sound. Mystic Aquarium is involved in rescuing and rehabilitating marine mammals, birds and other sea creatures, leading this effort not only in Long Island Sound but throughout New England. At Mystic Aquarium, a major research laboratory studies the health of marine mammals and is involved in exploring the correlation between marine animal health and human health issues. In Norwalk, The Maritime Aquarium's permanent exhibits focus primarily on Long Island Sound. The Maritime Aquarium plays a role in understanding the health of the Long Island Sound through the biodiversity database. This monitors species trends and collects data on 125 marine organisms and the Sound's water variables. The Maritime Aquarium has partnered with the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration to examine the impact of storms and super storms on the coastal regions of Long Island Sound.

Over the past decade, both institutions have branched out to look for new revenue opportunities. The Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk has an IMAX theater where Hollywood films now complement the classic documentaries that attract many repeat visitors. Mystic Aquarium launched a national distance learning program earning licensing fees from other aquariums and museums. Finally, both institutions have significantly improved profitability in their gift shops, their catering businesses, and their fee-based visitor programs are continuing to expand.

Exhibits and facilities in Aquariums are complex. Maintaining living creatures under water requires expertise in life support systems and continuous operation of pumps, filtration systems and other complex entities. The care of animals, including endangered or threatened species, must always be of primary concern. Both institutions remain fiscally responsible to ensure we provide exceptional care for our animals and an exceptional experience for our guest.

However, the unique nature of the facilities and mission, and the need to care for animals around the clock, limits the extent to which cost cutting can be achieved to deal with these shortfalls. We cannot shut down exhibits because they are *living* exhibits, nor can we easily transfer animals to other institutions because of regulatory restrictions. Both institutions provide a safe haven for animals who, through a variety of circumstances, are unable to thrive in their natural environment.

Aquariums are special and unique enterprises. They are a rare type of institution, with only a few such institutions in the United States, precisely because of their complexity. Frequently, Aquariums are built and supported by governmental entities in the United States as powerful engines for the redevelopment of local and regional economies. In fact, The Maritime Aquarium was built expressly to anchor redevelopment in South Norwalk, a very successful endeavor that has transformed a formerly blighted neighborhood and attracted \$315 million in private development funds.

The Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk and Mystic Aquarium are essential economic engines for Connecticut. Other communities and states will look to build these kinds of institutions to spur economic development; we are seeking sustained, reliable state support so that we can continue to drive economic activity. The requested investment in these two institutions is

critical. It is no small matter that both institutions are seeing other previously reliable sources of revenue eliminated.

Historically, we have served as good financial stewards of the state funding, consistently leveraging our annual support by insuring a positive return on the state's investment to Connecticut and its municipalities. We submit that the return on the State's investment is at least 92 times this amount to the State of Connecticut in direct economic impact, and it will continue to pay dividends in demonstrated improvement in the academic performance of Connecticut's school children. Both institutions are committed to using state funds to drive economic development; for advertising and marketing aimed at attracting tourism, and for support of educational programs benefiting nearly every child in Connecticut.

Funding for the two Aquariums is a good investment and assures that the aggregate funding for grants presented in the Governor's budget are allocated by the Legislature in support of two proven engines for economic growth. Support for tourism funding overall assures that the Connecticut tourism economy will grow. Funding for both should be viewed as investment that is guaranteed to yield a high return in direct revenue to the state as well as economic development at the local level.

Thank you for the opportunity to present tonight.